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WHAT MAKES A PEOPLE LETHARGIC OR ENERGETIC?

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It is usually assumed that the tone of a community, whether vigorous or apathetic, is determined by the prevailing traits of its individual members. Without disputing the importance of individual traits, the writer believes there are also general factors which condition the dominant tone of a community in respect to energy and inertia. The available productive energy of a society is not always equal to the sum of the physical vigor and mental acumen of all the individuals. Productive energy, like controlling beliefs, is largely dependent upon the social atmosphere by which it is surrounded.

Says Cooley:

The physical law of the persistence of energy in uniform quantity is a most illusive one to apply to human life. There is always a great deal more mental energy than is utilized, and the amount that is really productive depends chiefly on the urgency of suggestion. Indeed the higher activities of the human mind are, in general, more like a series of somewhat fortuitous explosions than like the work of a uniform force. . . . In the absence of suggestion the mind easily spends itself in minor activities; and there is no reason why this should not be true of a whole people and continue for centuries. Then again a spark may set it on fire and produce in a few years pregnant changes in the structure of society.¹

If "suggestion" in the above quotation be extended in its meaning to include anything that stimulates interest and instils hope in an individual or a people, his statement will be in accord with the most recent and advanced theories of the psychology of interest, effort, and energy, and will be very helpful in interpreting the vigor and energy of certain peoples as against the lethargy and inertia of other peoples of equal capacity.

There is a theory,² held by recent French and English psychologists and apparently verified by observations and analysis, that

¹ *Social Organization*, p. 328.

² Claparède, *Experimental Pedagogy*.

the energy by which our activities are performed may be drawn from either of two distinct sources. First there is the central reservoir or reserve store of human energy, available only for work that has an intrinsic interest and which draws the attention, not necessarily away from the work, but through and past its processes, and fixes it upon the purposes, or anticipated results, or upon certain pleasurable accompaniments which are previsited at its inception. Then there is the local production of energy within the nerve centers of the organ acting. With children the distinction between play and work is determined very largely by the source of the energy by which the activity is sustained. With adults the distinction is between interesting, fascinating work on the one hand and tedium and drudgery on the other. The former requires very little conscious effort and produces few toxins of fatigue. The latter requires constant conscious effort and produces many toxins of fatigue. The following table from Claparède represents this theory in graphic or schematic form:

CHARACTER OF WORK	RESISTANCE		EXPENDITURE OF ENERGY		TOXINS OF FATIGUE
	Of the Work Itself	Of the Reflexes of Defense	From the Reservoir	From Local Production	
1. Easy and interesting.	1	0	1	0	<i>Very few</i>
2. Difficult and interesting.....	10	0	10	0	<i>Few</i>
3. Easy and tedious or uninteresting.....	1	10	0	11	<i>Many</i>
4. Difficult and uninteresting.....	10	10	0	20	<i>Very many</i>

From the foregoing it will appear that the problem of accounting for the lethargy and inertia of some peoples as against the energy of others, or of the same peoples at different times, consists in determining the conditions which make unavailable their reserve of energy. Of such conditions we shall here briefly consider six.

Communism in property and industry causes societies to move in lockstep fashion, thus making all to conform in their stride to that of the most feeble and lethargic.—It is self-evident that any set of conditions which places a check or curb on self-expression, innovation,

and initiative, and which causes men to move in herds and to act in unison or in accordance with a prescribed standard will have a tendency to eliminate all rivalry, and will stifle interest by substituting, as the motive to action, the impelling force of necessity for the lure of hope and the suggestion of a personal interest. Kline and France in a study of "The Psychology of Ownership"¹ show that the principal cause of the "mental dulness, physical laziness, and lethargy of primitive races" is due to communism in property and in all their enterprises and undertakings more than to any other cause; and they quote numerous authorities to show that one of the most potent and essential factors in race development is a recognition of the right of the individual in the possession of something which he may call his own and upon which he may exercise his personal desires. Communism can demand no more than that each one come up with the average; and it is a fact of common experience that any attempt to conform to an average immediately lowers that average, since it is so much easier for the superior to slacken his pace or to lower his standard than for the inferior to increase or raise his. Thus does the average, by its own weight, tend to sink to constantly lowering levels.

Hypertrophy of institutionalism compels the individual to conform in his activities and manner of life to the mode or method of the group.—It differs from communism in that the latter lays stress upon the question, "How much?" The former simply asks "How?" Cooley, discussing the conflict between personality and institutionalism, says: "The timeworn question of conservatism as against change has evidently much in common with that of personality as against institutionalism. Innovation is bound up with the assertion of fresh personality as against mechanism. Wherever there is vigor and constructive power in the individual there is likely to be discontent with the establishment."² Again: "An institution is made up of persons but not of whole persons; each one enters into it with a specialized part of himself. Consider, for instance, the legal part of a lawyer, the ecclesiastical part of a church member, or the business part of a merchant. In antithesis

¹ *Pedagogical Seminary*, VI, 429 ff.

² *Op. Cit.*, p. 327.

to the institution, therefore, the person represents the wholeness and humanness of life; he is a corrector of partiality and a translator and distributor of special development."¹

This contributing by each individual of a part of himself to an institution is somewhat analogous to subscribing capital to a corporation. The part subscribed passes from individual to group control. Now if this subscription or investment represents a dominating part, a voting majority, of the individual's interests, then his activities, instead of being the result of choice, assume the character of tasks imposed from without. His successes and failures, indeed his very joys and sorrows, are merely dividends or assessments of the institution, over which he can at most only rejoice or grieve but which he cannot control. And when an institution numbers as its members all or even a large majority of the social group we have institutionalism "gone to seed." Under such circumstances even the "individual of vigor and constructive power," unless he be of that "sterner stuff" of which heroes and reformers are made, and is able to break the spell of orthodoxy and "regularity," will find if he tries to assert his personality that he is only the more heavily weighted by the institution which he serves. He will find himself as one of a number of persons who together are carrying a heavy load, such as a large beam or piece of timber. If the group walks bent and stooped he must do likewise; and the tendency will be for all to bend lower and lower as they proceed.

We are able, in a measure, to realize the great weight of the mediaeval church, as an institution, and its withering influence upon personality when we consider that the spell of its prestige was able to compel "the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, the successor of the Caesars and of Charlemagne," to stand clad in sackcloth and barefoot for four successive days in the dead of winter in the courtyard of the castle of the Roman pontiff waiting permission to kneel at his feet and beg forgiveness. It was the same menacing weight that compelled the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa of the "Haughty House of Hohenstaufen," when "overcome by emotion, awe, and reverence," and "in the presence of a

¹ Cooley, *Social Organization*, p. 319.

vast throng, to throw himself at the feet of the pope and humbly seek a reconciliation."

A too great preponderance of old men in places of authority and leadership is likely to be coincident with conservatism and compromise.—"Innovation is iconoclasm and sacrilege, and enthusiasm is only a milder form of insanity." Restraint and a calm self-control are the prime virtues. "Save your energies," is likely to be the advice of the aged to active energetic youth. But energy like the wine at the marriage feast is energy only when it is drawn out; and, like the manna of the Israelites, to be useful it must be used.

That periods of stagnation or depression in a country's history are likely to be contemporaneous with the domination of affairs by superannuates, while periods that are pregnant with change and reform are marked by the presence and influence of youth in the councils of state, is strikingly shown in an investigation made by B. E. Gowin at the University of Wisconsin in 1909 on the "Correlation between Reformatory Epochs and the Leadership of Young Men." In this a comparison is made between the average ages of the leaders in ten of the world's greatest modern reform movements with the ages of the leaders in times of quiet and conservatism. In the Protestant Reformation the average age of the leaders at the time of their greatest activity was thirty-eight years. In the Puritan Revolution of 1640 it was forty years. In the American Revolution the age of the leaders averaged thirty-eight years. At the beginning of the French Revolution the average of the eleven men who became leaders was but thirty-four years. Other periods and the age of leaders are:

Antislavery movement in America	41
Regeneration of Prussia, 1808-15	46
Modernizing of Japan	38
Awakening of China	38
Revolution in Russia	44
Revolt in Turkey	32

In contrast to the above he shows that the average age of leaders in these same countries in times noted for their conservatism was from twenty to thirty-three years greater.

It is not true that a man who in his youth is active and energetic will always counsel the same spirit in others when he grows old. Clay and Webster were willing that the nation should fight for its interests in 1812, but in 1849 and 1850 they counseled expediency and compromise. How much of the political apathy and economic instability which culminated in the panic of 1892 and 1893 may be due to the fact that for the twenty-five years preceding we had been giving out as rewards all positions of authority and leadership to the men who had been discovered in the strenuous years from 1861 to 1865? Says Professor Ross: "A nation is easiest to thrash about a generation after a successful war."

A child will scarcely keep up with its parent if it must step each time in his footstep, but if allowed to run at its own stride will usually beat him to the goal. The same principle holds true in business and in government. It is too wasteful a process to require that youth spend all its years of vigor and enthusiasm in acquiring the stride and mastering the methods of its elders. "It was," as Ross says, "a red-letter day for progress when the lad became his own master the moment he could wield a warrior's arms."

Undue reverence for past achievements is likely to render society irresponsive to present opportunities and responsibilities.—It is said that the Emperor Trajan was once remonstrated with by some of the Roman senators for employing the resources of the empire in the conquest of peoples so remote from Rome. He was told that all the nation's resources were needed to hold in subjection the provinces that had already been conquered. The emperor replied that it was for the sake of holding what they had that the new conquests had been undertaken; "for," said he, "if Rome's legions ever conclude that their work is done and that there are no more lands to conquer, they will be unable to maintain their rule where it is now firmly established." Alexander the Great wept because there were no more worlds for him to conquer, but his successors, so impressed with the magnificence of his achievements and the grandeur of their own inheritance, were unable to hold even a part of what had been given them.

Says Bagehot: "A large part, a very large part of the world

seems to be ready to advance to something good—to have prepared all the means to advance to something good—and then to have stopped and not advanced. India, China, Japan, almost every sort of oriental civilization, though differing in nearly all other things, are alike in this, they look as if they had paused when there was no reason for pausing—when a mere observer from without would say they were not likely to pause.”¹ This arrest of development, this nation-wide lethargy, is not due to a sudden epidemic of *hookworm*. Rather, it seems to me, is it due to the fact that these peoples, like Lot’s wife, committed the fatal error of looking backward. Then being so filled with wonder and admiration at the achievements of their ancestors, they undertook as their chief aim in life to preserve these ancient glories from the shocks of change. But ancient glories, like old vases, are pretty fragile things and require gentle handling; and a progressive, energetic people is like a healthy growing boy; it is not easy for either to walk lightly or bear a burden gently. Hence rather than take chances with their precious heritage on an untried way they pitched camp and set themselves as a permanent guard over their treasures where they first found that they possessed them.

Physical, social, and economic isolation removes men from the influence of the stimulus of standards or goals of achievement.—The effects of physical isolation upon progress have been commented upon extensively by students of history and sociology. It has been the peoples who have lived off the thoroughfares of migration and commerce, and have thus been deprived of the stimulus which comes from contact with other peoples, who have furnished the data for constructing a science of social embryology. There are in Asia and even in eastern Europe sections whose populations are as different from the peoples who surround them as the child is different from the adult.

A traveler in some of the hardly accessible sections of the Appalachian region of this country will find Colonial customs and standards preserved with scarcely a modification, certainly with no improvement. F. A. Sanborn in his description of a “Rural New England Community” says:

¹ Quoted by Ross, *Social Psychology*, 209.

In the center of this room [a village storeroom] is a big stove around which almost every evening throughout the year are gathered the more sociable men of the community. Some are seated on a low bench placed near the stove for their convenience—a bench so whittled by a generation of pocket knives as to have lost all resemblance to its original form; others sit on counters or on barrels, and there are always a few restless spirits who lean against whatever is convenient for that purpose with their hands in their pockets. . . . Nobody ever starves in our village, although some of the folk who live on byways and in places which are less accessible are poor, ill nourished, and ill clothed. . . . We do not care much for learning of any sort. Our letters—which we put off writing till about six months after they are due—do not excel in grammar or in penmanship. And it is really astonishing to ourselves how little we care for what goes on in the outside world. There is very little ambition of any sort among us, and the modern principle that everybody ought to work every day and throughout the whole of every day finds no acceptance whatever in our New England corner. There is no man who feels that he cannot afford to take off a day for visiting, for partridge shooting, or simply for resting whenever he wants to.¹

The inertia of communities and societies, where the caste system obtains, furnishes the best example of the deadening effect of social isolation. "Among the Hindoos," says Cooley, "a child is brought up from infancy in subjection to ceremonies and rites which stamp upon him the impression of a fixed and immemorial system. They control the most minute details of life and leave little room for choice." Returning missionaries from India, especially those who have had to do with mission schools, ascribe the indifference and apathy of the Hindoos toward social and economic improvement to the social isolation imposed by the caste system, an isolation as complete and effective as if the different classes were different species of animal life, physically unable to amalgamate. Everyone realizes that he is born to his status and that no amount of personal effort can improve it nor lack of effort lower it.

The greatest value to society of leaders in social reform and economic enterprises who have risen from the lower ranks is that their example appears as a rift in the cloud of isolation through which others of less penetrating vision may see a star of hope. The greatest service that leaders like Booker T. Washington and others are performing for the Negroes does not consist so much

¹ *Atlantic Monthly*, LXXXIII, 89 ff.

n the industrial and economic training which they are giving, however great that may be, but rather in stimulating interest and discovering for them energies and capabilities of which they were unaware.

One of the arguments advanced by the people of the South against the abolition of slavery was that the only way the fruits of the Negroes' labors could be made to support them was to hold them to work at unskilled labor principally upon the plantations under the constant vigilance of the taskmaster. It was argued that to free the Negroes would be to make of them pauper wards of the state or private charity. But with freedom and the prospect of receiving a personal remuneration for their work it has been found that free labor is more economical than slave labor. Instead of their not being able to maintain themselves, they have in the fifty years since their emancipation accumulated property representing almost three times the value which they themselves represented as slaves, and still have left sufficient energy to secure at least a modicum of education for three-fourths of their number. And the reason was not that the Negroes were sullen and rebellious, refusing to exert themselves as slaves, nor that they did not fear the taskmaster's lash; it was because there was no motive in their work but dread, no interest to tap the reserve of energy, and no anticipation to counteract the reflexes of defense. All effort was at the expense of the local production of energy.

The practice that is being adopted by certain corporations employing large numbers of men, of instituting profit-sharing devices and special rewards to their employees is not a form of charity nor a distribution of "conscience money," but a coolly calculated investment. The prospect of a share in the profits of the institution, or a reward for special merit gives an interest to the work which otherwise would be lacking, no matter how conscientious the workmen.

Forms of industry in which emphasis and attention must be directed to processes rather than purposes are more taxing and require a greater strain of conscious effort than those in which the individual is working toward a definite end, and in which the motive is interest

*in the outcome.*¹—When we apply this principle to the study of modern industrial systems we can perhaps appreciate a little more fully the great draft which they make upon human energy. Before the dominance of the machine in modern industry, each workman in nearly all trades fashioned some article in its entirety. His interest was sustained by an idea associated with the finished product. Luther said: “It is only slaves that die of overwork. Labor is neither cruel nor ungrateful. It restores the strength we give a hundred fold, and, unlike financial operations, the revenue is what brings in the capital”—the conditions being, however, that “the worker put soul and self into his work.” But how is it possible for a worker to bring a personal interest and enthusiasm to his work when his sole task is to perform a single operation over and over from morning till night upon bits of material that pass as monotonously as the telegraph poles pass the windows of a moving passenger coach?

In the shoemaking industry, for example, as many as one hundred men have a part in making a single shoe; each knowing little and caring less about the work of the man whose task immediately precedes or follows his own. A man takes his place like a piece of machinery with nothing to do (as employers are wont to say) but to see that his part of the machine runs regularly, to pull a lever here or throw a clutch there. The importance of the fact is overlooked that he must maintain an unblinking sentinel over all the reflexes of defense and that at the expense of energy produced in organs already poisoned with the toxins of fatigue.

And the case is all the more serious when these workers are growing children. It is a biological principle that any organ or faculty regularly prevented from functioning will atrophy. These child workers, denied the opportunity for spontaneous self-directed activity, shut away from everything that can touch their interests or provoke their enthusiasm, with no opportunity for developing a reserve of energy—is it not the normal thing to expect that they should develop into either listless, calloused dullards or unstrung neurasthenics?

¹ See Woodworth, *The Cause of a Voluntary Movement*; also Claparède, *op. cit.*